

The Death of Absolute Morality Depicted in Fyodor Dostoyevski's

"Crime and Punishment"

Raka Nadhif Ibrahim

English Department/Faculty of Language and Art, State University of Semarang, Indonesia

rakanadhifi@students.unnes.ac.id

Rahayu Puji Haryanti

English Department/Faculty of Language and Art, State University of Semarang, Indonesia

rahayu_ph@mail.unnes.ac.id

Abstract

Moral absolutism, the belief that certain actions are inherently right or wrong regardless of context, has long been a contested framework in both philosophy and literature. While much of the existing scholarship on Fyodor Dostoyevsky's *Crime and Punishment* (1866) focuses on its psychological and religious dimensions, relatively few studies have systematically examined how the novel portrays the collapse of moral frameworks through the lens of postmodern theory. This study aims to analyze the ways in which Dostoyevsky depicts the death of absolute morality as manifested in the character of Rodion Raskolnikov, whose self-constructed moral ideology gradually disintegrates throughout the narrative. Employing postmodernism as the primary theoretical framework, particularly Jean-François Lyotard's concept of the collapse of grand narratives and Michel Foucault's notion of power-knowledge in defining moral norms. This study conducts qualitative descriptive research based on close reading of the novel's key scenes, dialogues, and character developments. The findings reveal not only Raskolnikov's ideological breakdown reflects Dostoyevsky's broader critique of enlightenment rationalism but also the dangerous consequences of moral self-sovereignty. Overall, this study contributes to the ongoing discourse on morality in world literature and demonstrates that *Crime and Punishment* remain a profoundly relevant text for understanding contemporary moral crisis.

Keywords: grand narratives, moral absolutism, moral collapse, postmodernism, systems

INTRODUCTION

"Morality is a private and costly luxury"
(Henry B. Adam 273)

Few questions have proven as persistent and consequential in the history of human thought as the question of morality. From Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* to

Immanuel Kant's *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals* (1785), the Western philosophical tradition has produced numerous attempts to construct moral frameworks capable of reliably guiding human conduct across different cultures, periods, and circumstances. Among all these frameworks, moral absolutism occupies a particularly central and contested position.

In its most fundamental form, moral absolutism is the belief that certain moral truths exist independently of human culture, historical circumstance, or individual preference, and that these truths always apply universally to all people (Pojman & Fieser, 2009). For centuries, this position did not merely occupy academic discourse. It formed the structural backbone of legal systems, religious institutions, and political ideologies that shaped much of human civilization. Yet the accumulated experience of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries has increasingly exposed the fragility of this claim, and the question of whether any truly absolute moral standard can be sustained in practice is more open and more urgent today than it has ever been.

Contemporary evidence of this moral urgency is genuinely difficult to ignore. Jonathan Haidt (2012), in *The Righteous Mind: Why Good People Are Divided by Politics and Religion*, draws on extensive cross-cultural moral psychology research conducted across more than thirty countries to demonstrate that human beings do not operate from a single unified moral framework but from different combinations of foundational moral intuitions. The deepening moral polarization visible across many societies today, in Haidt's analysis, is not simply a disagreement about policy preferences. It reflects a far more fundamental clash between incompatible moral foundations that cannot be resolved through rational argument alone, because the parties involved are often working from entirely different moral premises.

Beyond the social sphere, the rapid development of artificial intelligence has added an entirely new dimension to the crisis. Floridi and Cowls (2019), writing in the *Harvard Data Science Review*, identify five core moral principles that they argue must

underpin any responsible development of AI in society, namely beneficence, non-maleficence, autonomy, justice, and explicability. The very fact that scholars at this level feel compelled to construct new moral frameworks from scratch is itself telling: the existing absolute moral systems have not proven adequate to the moral demands of the contemporary world. Taken together, these developments point toward a society that is not converging on greater moral clarity but moving further away from it.

Literature has always engaged with this kind of moral uncertainty with a depth and honesty that formal philosophical argument cannot fully replicate. Martha Nussbaum (1990), in *Love's Knowledge: Essays on Philosophy and Literature*, argues that literary narrative offers something irreplaceable to moral inquiry: a lived and affective engagement with moral dilemmas that allows readers to encounter the weight of moral choices from the inside rather than from a safe analytical distance. In Nussbaum's framework, novels are not simply illustrations of philosophical positions but genuine contributions to moral knowledge. This principle carries exceptional force when applied to the tradition of the Russian novel, where moral and philosophical questions were not decorative background themes but the very substance and driving force of the narrative itself. No writer in this tradition embodies this more completely than Fyodor Dostoyevsky, and no single work in his body of writing confronts the question of absolute morality more directly or more devastatingly than *Crime and Punishment*.

First published as a serial in the Russian literary journal *Russky Vestnik* throughout 1866, *Crime and Punishment* follows Rodion Raskolnikov, a former law student in St. Petersburg who murders a pawnbroker based

on a self-constructed moral theory that grants certain exceptional individuals the right to transgress ordinary moral laws. Raskolnikov is not a character who kills out of passion, poverty, or irrational impulse. He kills out of intellectual conviction, having composed a full academic article months before the murder in which he elaborates a complete theoretical justification for the act. His framework divides humanity into two categories: ordinary people, who must submit to conventional moral law, and extraordinary people, who possess a higher moral license to act beyond those laws in pursuit of a greater good.

What the novel constructs through this premise is not a simple crime narrative but a sustained philosophical examination of what happens when a human being attempts to build and inhabit an absolute moral system of his own design. As Joseph Frank (2010) argues, Raskolnikov's theory is Dostoyevsky's direct literary response to the utilitarian and nihilistic rationalism sweeping through Russian intellectual culture in the 1860s, a current of thought that held reason alone capable of overriding traditional moral constraints entirely.

Given this extraordinary scope of reception and influence, it is worth noting that the dominant traditions of scholarly engagement with *Crime and Punishment* have largely moved along two parallel tracks. Psychological readings, following the tradition of textual criticism developed by Wasiolek (1964) in *Dostoevsky: The Major Fiction*, have concentrated on Raskolnikov's mental breakdown as the central event of the novel and on the mechanisms of guilt and psychological disintegration that drive the narrative forward. Bakhtin (1984), in his foundational *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, opened a different but equally

influential tradition by reading Dostoyevsky's characters as autonomous philosophical voices engaged in unresolved and genuinely open dialogue, a polyphonic structure in which no single moral position is granted final authority. Meanwhile, readings informed by religious and spiritual concerns have tended to interpret the novel's conclusion as an ultimately affirmative statement about Christian moral redemption, focusing on Raskolnikov's confession and his relationship with Sonya as the narrative's spiritual resolution, a reading that Frank (2010) himself engages with extensively. Each of these traditions has produced genuinely significant insights about the novel. However, they share a common limitation that this study seeks to address: none of them is primarily concerned with analyzing *Crime and Punishment* as a sustained narrative about the systematic construction and subsequent disintegration of an absolute moral framework in the theoretical terms that postmodern philosophy makes available. The specific question of how Dostoyevsky represents the internal collapse of moral absolutism through the development of character and narrative has not been examined with adequate theoretical rigor in the existing body of scholarship.

This study addresses that gap by positioning *Crime and Punishment* within a postmodern theoretical framework, drawing specifically on two foundational perspectives. The first is Jean-François Lyotard's concept of the collapse of grand narratives, developed in *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge* (1984), which defines the condition of postmodernity as characterized by a fundamental distrust of large-scale belief systems that claim universal validity and seek to organize human experience around a single explanatory logic. Raskolnikov's moral theory

functions, in Lyotard's terms, as precisely this kind of grand narrative: a self-contained system that demands absolute authority and can tolerate no exceptions without threatening its own coherence. The second perspective is Michel Foucault's analysis of power-knowledge, developed in *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (1977), which argues that what societies call moral norms are not objective truths but products of institutional power relations that work to establish the boundaries between the normal and the deviant, and that these relations operate not only through external enforcement but through the internalization of norms by individuals themselves. Through Foucault's lens, Raskolnikov's confrontation with conventional morality becomes clear, a challenge to a power-knowledge system that ultimately proves impossible to fully escape, even for someone who has constructed an elaborate intellectual apparatus for doing so.

This study therefore aims to shed light on how Dostoyevsky depicts the death of absolute morality in *Crime and Punishment* through these two theoretical lenses. Two central research questions guide the analysis. The first is: how does the novel construct Raskolnikov's absolute moral framework as a grand narrative through the text? The second is: how is the disintegration of that framework represented through the progression of the novel's narrative and the development of its central character

The main guideline that governs this entire study is postmodernism, applied specifically through the combined frameworks of Jean-François Lyotard and Michel Foucault. Lyotard's *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge* (1984) establishes the foundational premise from which the analysis departs: that modernity was built upon grand narratives, large-scale

systems of belief that claimed universal validity and provided totalizing explanations of moral, political, and historical experience, and that the postmodern condition is defined by a fundamental collapse of confidence in precisely these systems. Foucault's *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (1977) complements this by providing the study with its second analytical category, which is the mechanism of power-knowledge, offering a way to read the social and institutional forces that work against Raskolnikov not as simple legal opposition but as a normalized disciplinary system that defines moral boundaries, produces legibility around deviance, and ultimately drives the individual who transgresses those boundaries toward internalization and self-submission. Together, these two frameworks do not operate as separate or competing lenses but as complementary dimensions of a single postmodern reading: Lyotard explains what Raskolnikov builds and why it fails on its own terms, while Foucault explains how the external moral order works to accelerate and complete that failure. This dual-framework guideline shapes every stage of the study, from the identification and classification of textual data to the interpretive conclusions drawn from them, ensuring that the analysis remains theoretically consistent and grounded in the specific conceptual vocabulary that postmodern thought makes available.

METHODS

This study adopts a qualitative approach with descriptive literary analysis as its primary research design. Qualitative research, as defined by Creswell (2014) in *Research Design: Qualitative, Quantitative, and Mixed Methods Approaches*, is a mode of inquiry in

which the researcher focuses on understanding and interpreting meaning through words, narratives, and textual artifacts rather than through numerical data or statistical measurement.

In this case, the primary data source for this study is the English translation of Fyodor Dostoyevsky's *Crime and Punishment*, translated by Roger Cockrell and published by Alma Classics in 2022.

Data collection was conducted through the close reading technique. In this study, data collection proceeded through three sequential stages. The first stage involved a complete and uninterrupted reading of the novel to establish a firm understanding of its overall narrative arc, its major characters, and its central thematic preoccupations. The second stage involved targeted re-reading focused on identifying and annotating passages that are directly relevant to the construction, maintenance, and eventual disintegration of Raskolnikov's absolute moral framework. Passages selected at this stage included his interior monologues in the period leading up to and immediately following the murder, his articulated theoretical claims about the category of the "extraordinary man," the key confrontational dialogues with Porfiry Petrovich, and the morally charged exchange sequences with Sonya Marmeladova. The third stage involved organizing the annotated passages into structured data units that could be systematically analyzed in the subsequent stage.

Data analysis followed a four-stage interpretive procedure consistent with standard qualitative textual analysis as described by Bressler (2011) in *Literary Criticism: An Introduction to Theory and Practice*. The first stage was identification, in which all collected textual data were

examined and those passages most directly relevant to the representation of absolute morality and its internal collapse were isolated from the broader body of collected material. The second stage was classification, in which the identified data were organized according to the two theoretical frameworks guiding the study. Passages related to the construction, functioning, and failure of Raskolnikov's self-constructed moral system as a totalizing belief structure were classified under the Lyotardian framework of grand narrative collapse. Passages related to how moral norms operate through institutional and social power and how those norms work to discipline and recapture the individual who defies them were classified under the Foucauldian framework of power-knowledge. The third stage was interpretation, in which each classified data unit was read closely in its specific narrative context to determine how it contributes to the broader pattern of moral construction and disintegration that the novel develops across its six parts. The fourth stage was conclusion, in which the interpretive findings from across the novel were synthesized into a coherent analytical argument that responds directly to the two research questions guiding the study.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The first finding of this study is that Raskolnikov's moral system, as constructed across the early sections of the novel, functions as a textbook example of what Lyotard (1984) calls a grand narrative, a totalizing belief system that claims universal validity, organizes all moral experience under a single explanatory "logic", and tolerates no exceptions without threatening its own coherence.

"...all men are divided into 'ordinary'

and 'extraordinary.' Ordinary men have to live in submission, have no right to transgress the law, because, you see, they are ordinary. But extraordinary men have a right to commit any crime and to transgress the law in various ways, simply because they are extraordinary." (Part 3, Chapter 5)

The main architecture of this system is laid out most explicitly in this passage when Raskolnikov defends the published article that Porfiry Petrovich uses as a point of interrogation. Raskolnikov divides all of humanity into two fundamental categories. The first consists of ordinary people who must live according to the legal and moral conventions of their society. The second consists of extraordinary people who possess a qualitatively different moral constitution and, in Raskolnikov's own words, have the right to allow their conscience to "step over blood".

"If such a man is forced for the sake of his idea to step over a corpse or wade through blood, he can, within his own conscience, allow himself to step over blood..." (Part 3, Chapter 5).

This formulation is not a plea for general lawlessness or irrational violence. Raskolnikov is constructing a higher-order moral framework in which transgressing ordinary moral law is itself presented as a moral act, provided the agent belongs to the correct category and acts in the service of a sufficiently large purpose. Napoleon Bonaparte is his most frequently invoked historical example, a figure who, in Raskolnikov's reading, did not hesitate to cross moral thresholds because he understood himself to be operating on behalf of a historical destiny larger than conventional morality could comprehend. The word "salutary" is especially significant here because it reveals that Raskolnikov's system does not abandon moral legitimacy.

This is precisely the structure Lyotard (1984) describes: a narrative that justifies itself by appealing to a universal good that transcends any moral constraints of ordinary life. Scanlan (2002), in his philosophical study of Dostoyevsky's thought, identifies this theory as Dostoyevsky's most direct literary embodiment of the utilitarian and rationalist currents dominating Russian intellectual culture in the 1860s, specifically the strand of thought associated with Chernyshevsky and the nihilists, who believed that reason alone was sufficient to override traditional moral constraints. The story builds up Raskolnikov's theory as the most honest and radical expression of that intellectual tendency and then builds the rest of the novel as a systematic account of what happens when someone attempts to inhabit it.

What makes the theory a grand narrative rather than merely a provocative opinion is its totality. It does not coexist with competing moral frameworks. It replaces them. It classifies them as inadequate. It positions its author as someone who has moved beyond the limitations that bind ordinary moral reasoners. This paradigm is central to understanding why its eventual failure is so complete. A partial moral belief can be revised without destroying the person who holds it. A grand narrative, because it structures the entire self-understanding of its believer, collapses the person when it collapses.

The Murder as Grand Narrative in Practice

The murder of Alyona Ivanovna in Part One represents Raskolnikov's attempt to operationalize his moral theory, to move it from the level of intellectual argument to lived confirmation. Before the act, he frames that Alyona as not a particular human being but as an abstraction within his moral taxonomy. Alyona, a pawnbroker, is widely disliked

because she is a greedy and selfish woman who loves hoarding money by exacts interests from those who indebt themselves to her. A type of person which is nothing more than a disease to be stepped over.

“Break what must be broken, once for all, that’s all, and take the suffering on oneself” (Part I, Chapter 6)

This dehumanization is not incidental. It is logically necessary for the grand narrative to function in practice. If the pawnbroker is an obstacle within a purpose-driven scheme rather than a person with intrinsic moral worth, then eliminating her does not constitute a violation of any moral norm that matters within Raskolnikov's system. The system requires the reduction of complex human particulars to abstract categories, and Raskolnikov performs that reduction with impressive consistency in the lead-up to the crime.

Lyotard (1984) identifies this kind of categorical reduction as one of the defining features of grand narrative thinking. To maintain internal coherence, grand narratives must suppress or flatten the complexity of actual experience. They work by making the world easy to understand in their own terms and dismissing whatever does not fit. Hutcheon (1988), in her analysis of postmodern literary representation, argues that the central problem with totalizing systems of meaning is their inability to accommodate the irreducible particularity of actual events and actual people. The moment a grand narrative meets a genuine interest that refuses to be categorized, it begins to unravel.

“She said nothing, she only looked at me without a word. But it hurts more, it hurts more when they don’t blame” (Part I, Chapter 7)

“He couldn’t understand it at all; he had

forgotten to lock the door!... It was not a crime; it was something entirely different” (Part I, Chapter 7)

The unravelling begins before Raskolnikov even leaves the murder scene. Lizaveta, the pawnbroker's half-sister, arrives unexpectedly and Raskolnikov kills her too. This second death is never accounted for by his theory. Lizaveta poses no obstacle to any larger purpose. She is, by any measure, within his own moral system, an innocent bystander. The fact that he kills her anyway, under the pressure of the uncontrollable contingency of the actual event, is the first evidence in the text that the grand narrative cannot manage real experience. The theory was built in the clean space of intellectual abstraction. The murder happened in the irreducibly messy space of physical reality, and the theory did not survive the encounter intact.

Cognitive Dissonance: The Grand Narrative Fails from Within

The most theoretically significant dimension of the novel's post-murder narrative is that the collapse of Raskolnikov's moral system begins internally, long before any external threat materializes. He is not immediately caught. The police have no direct evidence. He is, by the logic of crime-and-detection narratives, in a position of relative safety. And yet the novel records a rapid psychological deterioration that follows a tone of the grand narrative promised liberation and self-confirmation, and the actual experience of having acted on it produces exactly the opposite.

Raskolnikov falls into severe perplexity almost immediately after the murder. He cannot think clearly. He forgets where he has hidden the stolen goods. He nearly confesses

to strangers in moments of compulsion he cannot explain or control.

“No, those are not the real means! No, it’s not the right way!” (Part 2, Chapter 1)

This quotation is not a metaphor or rhetorical exaggeration. It is a precise description of what it feels like when a grand narrative fails from the inside. The theory told him that successfully stepping over an obstacle would confirm him as an extraordinary man. Instead, the act of stepping over destroyed the self that had built the theory. He killed the moral framework that gave his life meaning far more thoroughly than he killed Alyona Ivanovna.

Lyotard's (1984) account of grand narrative failure is directly applied here. He argues that grand narratives do not fail primarily because they are intellectually refuted from outside. They fail because they cannot accommodate the irreducible complexity of real experience and because the contradictions they generate become too great to sustain. Raskolnikov's theory generated a specific experiential prediction: extraordinary men feel free when they cross moral thresholds. The actual experience of crossing that threshold produced suffering, paralysis, and a kind of psychological dissolution that the theory had no vocabulary for explaining. The gap between the theory's promise and the reality it produced could not be bridged, and it was this internal incoherence that initiated the collapse, not any external pressure.

“He did not want to look at the purse...he shoved it into his pockets...he sat on the bed and stared into the space in a sort of heavy stupor...and would not have cared to go and look into the purses now for anything in the world” (Part 1, Chapter 7)

This passage aligned with Hutcheon's (1988) argument that the postmodern condition is characterized precisely by the experience of encountering the limits of totalizing systems from within those systems rather than from outside them. Raskolnikov is, in this sense, a postmodern figure living in a nineteenth-century novel. He builds the kind of grand narrative that Lyotard would later theorize, and he experiences its failure in exactly the terms Lyotard would describe.

Porfiry Petrovich and the Machinery of Power-Knowledge

While the internal collapse of Raskolnikov's grand narrative begins immediately after the murder, the external dimension of its disintegration is organized primarily through his three encounters with Porfiry Petrovich numerous parts of the story. Porfiry is one of the most carefully constructed figures in the novel precisely because reading him through Foucault's (1977) framework of power-knowledge reveals the full sophistication of Dostoyevsky's moral design.

Porfiry has very little material evidence against Raskolnikov. He acknowledges this openly and with evident satisfaction, as though the lack of conventional evidence is itself a kind of trap. What he has instead is a deep understanding of how the moral-judicial system operates and how individuals who challenge its norms inevitably produce evidence of their own guilt through the very act of resistance. In Foucault's (1977) analysis, the examination is one of the central mechanisms through which disciplinary power normalizes individuals. The examination does not simply extract information. It places the subject in a field of visibility where their behaviors, their language, and their emotional reactions

become legible as signs within a pre-established framework of categories, and this legibility works against the subject regardless of whether they speak or stay silent.

“Ordinary men have to live in submission, have no right to transgress the law, because, don’t you see, they are just ordinary. But extraordinary men, they have the right to commit any crime and transgress the law in any way, just because, they are extraordinary. That was your idea, if I am not mistaken?”

“I simply hinted that an ‘extraordinary’ man has the right... that is not an official right, but an inner right to decide in his own conscience to overstep... certain obstacles, and only then in case it is essential for the practical fulfilment of his ideas.” (Part 3, Chapter 5)

In this line, Porfiry raises Raskolnikov's published article “On Crime” about extraordinary men as though discussing it purely as a matter of intellectual curiosity. This is a calculated move within the power-knowledge apparatus. By engaging Raskolnikov on his own theoretical ground, Porfiry forces him into an impossible position. If Raskolnikov distances himself from the theory, he displays weakness and evasion. If he defends it, he confirms the psychological investment in a motive that implies him. Raskolnikov, caught between these two positions, becomes increasingly agitated in ways he cannot fully control. He speaks too quickly. He gives more detail than the situation demands. His theoretical confidence and his social anxiety visibly fail to coexist. The power-knowledge system does not need Raskolnikov to confess to anything in this conversation. It needs him to become visible within its categories, and he has already done exactly that.

“Why, you, Rodion Romanovich! You are the murderer!”

“I came to give you a piece of advice...Do you know that you absolutely must confess? I will even add that this is entirely in your own interest for me to do so”

“Confess and make an end of it. Believe me, it will be better for you. I will arrange things so that it will appear as an aberration...” (Part 6, Chapter 2)

In this passage, Porfiry visits Raskolnikov privately and tells him, with something that reads more like pastoral care than legal threat, that he knows what Raskolnikov has done. Adding that he should confess and voluntary surrender will serve him far better than waiting to be caught by evidence.

This is the moment where Foucault's (1977) account of disciplinary power is most nakedly visible in the text. The system is not applying external force. It is channeling the entire normative apparatus of law, conscience, morality, and social redemption toward the production of a voluntary submission. The system does not need a conviction obtained through evidence. It needs the individual to recognize themselves within their categories and choose to submit. This is, as Foucault argues, the goal of normalized disciplinary power: not punishment but the production of a subject who internalizes the norms that govern him.

Sonya Marmeladova: The Counter-Narrative and the Power of Internalized Norms

Sonya Marmeladova operates in the novel on two levels that are both relevant to this analysis. On the first level, she represents

a moral counter-narrative to Raskolnikov's grand narrative, a system of moral meaning built on suffering, compassion, and faith rather than on rational self-sovereignty. In addition, she also functions as the most effective carrier of the internalized moral norms that Foucault (1977) describes as the deepest and most durable form of power-knowledge's operation. These two levels reinforce each other and together they account for her unusual power in the novel's moral architecture.

"Jesus saith unto her, 'Said I not unto thee that if thou wouldest believe, thou shouldest see the glory of God'"

"Then they took away the stone from the place where the dead was laid. And Jesus lifted His eyes and said 'Father, I thank Thee that Thou hast heard Me'"

"And I knew that Thou hearest Me always, but because of the people which stand by I said it, that they may believe that Thou hast sent Me"

"And when He thus has spoken, He cried with a loud voice, 'Lazarus, come forth'"

"And he, that was dead, came forth"

"Bound hand and foot with graveclothes; and his face was bound about with a napkin. Jesus saith unto them, 'Loose him and let him go'"

"Then many of the Jews which came to Mary and had seen the things which Jesus did believed on Him" (Part 4, Chapter 4)

In that passage, Sonya reads to Raskolnikov from the Gospel of John, the passage describing the raising of Lazarus from the dead. The scene has been analyzed primarily as a moment of Christian symbolism,

and that reading is valid. But at the level of moral philosophy, what happens in this scene is equally significant. Raskolnikov listens to a narrative about a man who was dead and came back to life, read by a woman who has endured what she has endured and maintained not only her faith but her essential humanity. The contrast with Raskolnikov's own condition is devastating to his grand narrative without a single word of argument being deployed against it. His theory of the extraordinary man cannot produce the kind of meaning that Sonya embodies simply by existing. His rational moral taxonomy has made him, in the most concrete psychological sense, less capable of living than a woman who survives by submitting to things far more degrading than anything his theory requires him to endure.

"I know and will tell... you, only you. I have chosen you. I'm not coming to you to ask forgiveness, but simply to tell you"

"Don't interrupt me, Sonia...I want to prove one thing only, that the devil led me on then and he has shown me since that I had not the right to take that path, because I am just such a louse as all the rest. He was mocking me and here I've come to you now! Welcome your guest! If I were not a louse, should I have come to you? Listen, when I went to the old woman's, I only went to try... And you may be sure of that!"

"Crime? What crime?... My killing a loathsome, harmful louse, a filthy old moneylender woman... and you call that a crime?"

"I've only killed a louse, Sonia, a useless, loathsome, harmful creature"

"I simply killed; I killed for myself, for myself alone, and at that point it was all the same to me whether I would become a benefactor of mankind or would spend

my whole life like a spider catching everyone in my web and sucking their vital juices out of them" (Part 5, Chapter 4).

In this line, Raskolnikov's confession to Sonya becomes the most important single speech in the novel for the purposes of this analysis. He tells her, that he has been unable to sustain anyone else, why he committed the murder. He dismantles his own theory piece by piece. He tells her that he did all those justifications were just retrospective scaffolding built over a simpler and more disturbing truth. This admission annihilates the theoretical architecture of the grand narrative. He was not acting in the service of a universal good. He was testing a theory about his own identity, and the test produced a result that his theory had no capacity to explain or absorb.

Lyotard (1984) argues that a grand narrative loses its legitimacy not when it is proven false in a logical sense, but when it can no longer organize the believer's experience in a way that feels coherent and meaningful. Raskolnikov's confession to Sonya is the moment where this organizational failure becomes fully conscious for him. He stops performing the theory and acknowledges what it has produced.

Confession as Collapse: The Death of Absolute Morality

The final section of the novel, culminating in Raskolnikov's decision to surrender to the authorities, represents the total and irreversible disintegration of his absolute moral system. What is essential to understand is that this surrender is not the result of external coercion. Porfiry has no evidence strong enough to force a conviction. Raskolnikov could, in principle, continue to resist. What he cannot do is continue to live

within the wreckage of a grand narrative that has failed at every level it promised to succeed.

"Perhaps, I've been unfair to myself... perhaps after all, I am a man and not a louse and I've been in too great a hurry to condemn myself"

"I dare say. I can see I'm ridiculous myself..." (Part 6, Chapter 2)

"A man on a square yard of space... would stand for a thousand years, for eternity, rather than die at once." (Part 1, Chapter 3)

This lines, explained Raskolnikov's experience of existential dissolution so completely that ordinary life became impossible to sustain. He could not eat normally, sleep normally, think clearly, or form coherent relationships. The gap between what the theory promised and what the experience delivered had grown too wide to bridge through any further act of intellectual will. In Lyotard's (1984) terms, the grand narrative has exhausted its capacity to produce legitimacy. It is dead in the most functional sense: it no longer does what a belief system is supposed to do, which is to organize experience in a way that makes life livable.

From the Foucauldian perspective, the confession is simultaneously the moment where the power-knowledge system achieves its deepest goal. Foucault (1977) argues that the aim of modern disciplinary systems is not the infliction of punishment but the production of normalization, the transformation of the deviant individual into a subject who understands himself through the system's categories and submits to them as though they were his own conclusion. Raskolnikov does not surrender because he

has been caught. He surrenders because he has run out of any other way to understand himself. The confession is an act of self-normalization. He is, in the most complete possible sense, recaptured by the power-knowledge system he attempted to transgress.

Bakhtin (1984) argues that Dostoyevsky never allows any single moral voice in the text to achieve final authority. The epilogue is consistent with this reading. In Siberia, Raskolnikov still does not feel that his idea was wrong in principle. He feels only that he lacked the strength to carry it through.

"If only fate could bring remorse...burning remorse that breaks the heart into pieces, that drives away sleep, the kind of remorse whose dreadful torments yield visions of the noose, the whirlpool! Oh, how glad he would have been! Torments and teras... that, too, is life"

"Really, what is it about my deed that they find so hideous?...That it was evil? What does that mean, an 'evil deed'? My conscience is untroubled. Yes, of course, a criminal act has been committed; yes, of course, the letter of the law has been violated, and blood's been shed, so take my head for the letter of the law...and that's your lot! And, of course, plenty of humanity's benefactors, who never inherited power but grabbed it for themselves, should also have been executed after taking the very first step. But those people coped with the step that they took, which is why they are right, but I couldn't cope with mine, so I had no right to take it"

It is not until the very last pages, as shown in the passage, the narrator describes with the language of dream and premonition, that something shifts in him, something that the novel pointedly refuses to define in theoretical terms. Dostoyevsky does not replace Raskolnikov's collapsed grand

narrative with a competing grand narrative. He leaves him in the condition that Lyotard (1984) would later name as the postmodern condition: the condition of a human being who has lost the totalizing moral framework that once organized his experience and has not yet found any adequate replacement.

CONCLUSION

This study set out to examine how Fyodor Dostoyevsky depicts the death of absolute morality in Crime and Punishment through the lens of postmodern theory. By applying Lyotard's (1984) concept of the collapse of grand narratives and Foucault's (1977) framework of power-knowledge, the analysis has produced two findings that respond directly to the research questions guiding this study.

In answer to the first research question, the analysis demonstrates that Raskolnikov's absolute moral framework is constructed throughout the early sections of the novel as a fully formed grand narrative in the sense that Lyotard describes. His theory of the extraordinary man is not an impulsive rationalization but a systematic intellectual architecture that claims universal validity, divides all of humanity into a rigid moral hierarchy, and positions its author as someone who has moved beyond the constraints that govern ordinary moral life. The murder of Alyona Ivanovna is presented in the text not as a crime in the conventional sense but as a deliberate attempt to confirm the theory through practice, to transform an abstract grand narrative into a lived moral reality.

In answer to the second research question, the analysis shows that the disintegration of this framework follows a traceable three-stage process across the

novel's narrative. The first stage is internal collapse, where the experiential reality of the murder fails to match the liberation the theory promised, producing instead the cognitive dissonance and psychological dissolution recorded in Raskolnikov's interior monologue in the novel's middle sections. The second stage is external disciplinary pressure, where Porfiry Petrovich, operating through the mechanisms of the power-knowledge apparatus that Foucault identifies, does not defeat Raskolnikov through evidence but through a sustained process of normalization that renders his defiance increasingly incoherent and unsustainable. The third stage is voluntary submission, where Raskolnikov's confession and surrender represent the full internalization of the moral norms he attempted to transcend, which is the condition that Foucault (1977) identifies as the goal of modern disciplinary systems.

Taken together, these findings support the central argument of this study: that *Crime and Punishment* is not simply a psychological novel about guilt or a religious novel about redemption, but a sustained narrative about the structural impossibility of sustaining an absolute moral grand narrative when it is brought into contact with the irreducible complexity of actual human experience.

Raskolnikov builds an absolute moral system that functions precisely as Lyotard describes grand narratives as functioning. He deploys it against a particular target in a specific act. The act fails to produce the experiential confirmation the system promised. The system then disintegrates through a combination of internal incoherence and external disciplinary pressure mediated through the power-knowledge apparatus that Foucault analyzes. The result is not the triumph of an alternative moral system but the collapse of the one

Raskolnikov built, leaving behind exactly the kind of moral vacancy that marks the postmodern condition Lyotard theorizes.

REFERENCES

- Gert, J., & Gert, B. (2025). The definition of morality. In E. N. Zalta & U. Nodelman (Eds.), *The Stanford encyclopedia of philosophy* (Spring 2025 ed.). Metaphysics Research Lab, Stanford University.
<https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2025/entries/morality-definition/>
- Scanlon, T. M., 1982, "Contractualism and Utilitarianism", in *Utilitarianism and Beyond*, Amartya Sen and Bernard Williams (eds.), Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 103–128.
doi.org/10.1017/cbo9780511611964.007
- Bakhtin, M. (1984). *Problems of Dostoevsky's poetics* (C. Emerson, Trans.). University of Minnesota Press. (Original work published 1963)
- Dostoyevsky, F. (2022). *Crime and punishment* (Roger Cockrell, Trans.). Alma Classics. (Original work published 1866)
- Kant, I. (2017). *Groundwork for the metaphysic of morals* (J. Bennett, Trans.). Early Modern Texts. (Original work published 1785).
<https://www.earlymoderntexts.com/assets/pdfs/kant1785.pdf>
- Nussbaum, M. C. (1990). *Love's knowledge: Essays on philosophy and literature*. Oxford University Press.
- Floridi, L., & Cowls, J. (2019). A unified framework of five principles for AI in society. *Harvard Data Science Review*, 1(1).
<https://doi.org/10.1162/99608f92.8cd550d1>
- Wasiolek, E. (1964). *Dostoevsky: The major fiction*. MIT Press. Said, Edward W. (1979). *Orientalism*. New York: Vintage Books.

Pojman, L. P., & Fieser, J. (2009). *Ethics: Discovering right and wrong* (6th ed.). Wadsworth Cengage Learning.

Miller, C. (2006). Shafer-Landau and moral realism [Review of the book *Moral Realism: A Defence*, by R. Shafer-

Landau]. *Social Theory and Practice*, 32(2), 1–21.
<https://philopedia.org/works/nicomachean-ethics/>.